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ABSTRACT

An instructional strategy, designed for any basic semester speech and/or communication course, helps students improve their informational interviewing skills. For the strategy to work smoothly, the following conditions should be met: an introductory required speech communication course; a predetermined and uniformly used amount of course content time slated for interpersonal communication; a basic course text used by all instructors with a specific text chapter on interviewing; audiovisual support; and local availability of a variety of business, professional, governmental, and scientific workers to be interviewed. Videotaping all basic course students while interviewing each other is often an impossible task given the logistics of large numbers of students and limited video equipment. In the strategy, each student conducts three out-of-class interviews with persons currently occupying positions to similar to the one they expect to hold one to five years after graduation. During these interviews, students explore communication demands, skills and problems as related to their chosen career and probe general career duties and responsibilities. Students set up the meeting time, date, and place. Following the interviews, students organize the information into a 5-10 page critical analysis paper, with priority given to the content on communication skills in the workplace. The strategy has been used for 5 years at Northern Virginia Community College and continues to be refined. (A part of the critical aspect of a nursing student's paper and six notes are included.) (RS)

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COMMUNITY AND COLLEGIALITY: CONSTRUCTING THE REALITY OF THE ACADEMIC WORKPLACE IN BASIC SPEECH COURSES

"THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW"

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE 65TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

OF THE

SOUTHERN SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

MONTELEONE HOTEL

NEW ORLEANS, LA

APRIL 5-9, 1995

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-A sportscaster, with microphone and TV camera crew trailing behind, rushed up to a football coach whose team had just lost a game seven to six. The loss also took the team out of post season bowl contention. "Well," the struggling sportscaster probed, "We blew a tough one, didn't we coach?" The coach blurted out, "How the hell am I suppose to answer that one?" "Oh, I didn't mean to, oh, uh...." stammered the TV interviewer.

-A company representative while recruiting on a college campus, asked a graduating senior, "Why do you want to work for IBM?" The student fired back in a single-word answer, "Money". The startled interviewer asked, "Aren't there any other reasons?" "No, Sir!" was the only response.

-A member of a public opinion survey team asked a person at the door of their home, "How do you feel about the Contract For America?" The person responded, "I really don't know." The interviewer further probed, "Do you favor any of its provisions?" "I told you, I don't know!" The resident fired back. "But, surely, you must...." The door slammed abruptly.

The participants in these fictional situations were all taking part in interviews, a common form of purposeful, planned live interactive communication. Because interviewing has become so prevalent in our society, this interpersonal act has become firmly established in today's College speech, English and/or Communication classes.

The purpose of my speech today is to present an instructional strategy which is designed for any basic semester speech and/or communication course. In order for it to work smoothly, the following conditions should be met:

#1 - An introductory semester and/or quarter required speech communication course is a General Education Core requirement for all or most academic programs;

#2 - A predetermined and uniformly used amount of course

content time is slated for interpersonal communication study within the course outline, i.e. a 3-4 week block of time;

#3 - A basic course text is uniformly used by all campus locations by all FT/PT instructors and a specific text chapter on interviewing is included. This textbook chapter, obviously, should include content coverage of such basic elements as the following: #1) nature of the interviewee; 2) planning techniques for role of interviewer and interviewee; 3) stages of the interview; 4) basic types of interviews <u>including the informational interview</u>; and 5) common types of interview questions, etc.

#4 - Audio visual support in the form of filmstrips, transparencies, and more probably video tape models of interviews from commercial television such as "Barbara Walters Specials" and training videos such as Johnson and Rudolph's video, "The Employment Interview;"

#5 - Finally, the strategy depends upon the local availability of a variety of business, professional, governmental and scientific workers who are within easy commuting distance of students taking the class. The greater the number of basic course section, obviously, the larger the pool of outside sources needed to complete the task.

All of these constraints are met in my College location and undoubtedly make the effectiveness of this strategy more

pronounced.

RATIONALE

The need for bridging the gap between classroom instruction and the work place has long been called for by leaders in business, industry and education. As we increasingly look toward the 21st Century and a global economy, many of our states are mandating studies, commissions and task forces to define goals, objectives and courses of study so as to formulate a model of higher education needed in the year 2,000 and beyond. For example, Virginia has legislatively mandated the "Commission of the University of the 21st Century" and has conducted hearings with leaders in all areas of American life. The most recent report from that group made the following prediction:

> The university/college of the 21st Century must reflect the reflective practice to allow students to integrate life's practice's with university/college programs. By intertwining field careers with academic programs, question of what happens in the work place can be better related to questions of how the academic model works.[1]

Other educational futurists call for more and more integration of the place and academic courses. "We're creating an even higher mix of skills required while the people coming on are not ready to fill these jobs," says William Johnston, vice president of the Hudson Institute, an Indianapolis think tank and author of "Workforce 2000". This publication compared the skills of workers coming into the workplace to the demands of jobs being created.[2]

The growing business of educating and training workers on the job

reflect several trends, all of which will encourage more training and skill development at the work cite itself. A notable example is the Aetna Institute for Corporate Education, a state-of-the-art facility for educating and training employees in Hartford. This company spends annually $40 million offering 250 courses ranging from management, business writing, speaking, listening and yes interviewing technique. All told, American businesses and industries are spending as much as $210 billion a year training and educating workers. By comparison, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that higher education costs last year were $133 billion.[3] Consequently, we can see the apparent need for a continuance of training and skill development in the work place.

Speech Communication research at the college/university level has seriously questioned the effectiveness of interview training using video taped feed-back. The Iowa State University study has reported in Communication Education, January, 1986, suggests that there are serious questions as to how much training in skill development students gain in performing video taped classroom interview simulation. Authors Sorenson and Pickett suggest:

> These studies demonstrate that if speech instructors must make instructional choices, more mileage can be obtained from rating of video tapes as opposed to instructor feed-back from video simulations.[4]

Although more research is needed to further validate Sorenson and Pickett's conclusion, many professionals in our field have long expressed reservations on the value of a one-time video-taped experience in a basic speech course.

From a very practical position, management of video taping for multi-sections of a basic speech course could become an "instructor's nightmare". Many community colleges (and I suspect 4-year institution as well), simply do not have physical facilities to schedule, tape and critically view 15-40 sections of basic speech. Given the logistics of class meeting times at all hours of the day, night, Saturday (and even at our college on Sunday morning), the many PT instructors we are forced to use, the variety of class locations, the availability of only one color Hitachi TV camera and one mini-cam unit, video taping all basic course students while interviewing each other becomes simply an impossible task.

THE STRATEGY

The general description of the strategy is as follows:

1-Each student is asked to conduct three (3) out-of-class interviews with persons currently occupying positions similar to the one they expect to hold anywhere from one to five years after graduation.

2-The purpose of such a strategy is to explore communication demands, skills and problems as related to their chosen career and to probe general career duties and responsibilities. The immediate course objective, of course, is to practice the interview techniques as studied in class with realistic settings in the work place.

3-Location of the three persons is the first step and in order

to assist and speed up the selection process, two sources are suggested to the students. First, they may use a copy of local professionals, business persons and workers as provided on handouts by instructor. These are limited to previous year's sources, however. Second, they are encouraged to contact the Counseling Office whose office provides a rich compendium of work place sources. Third, the students use working parents or family members whose contact on their jobs open many opportunities. Family members themselves are not encouraged as interviewees; however, special permission is given as long as the event takes place within the work place setting.

4-The next action calls for the student to set up a meeting time, date and place. These appointments are made by the students themselves via phone call, letter or in person.

5-On the appointment date, the student conducts the interview according to the basic outline of five required, communication skill questions plus the career related questions of their choosing.

6-Recording of the responses may be done by notetaking or audio taping. Permission to audio tape the interview should be requested in advance and students are encouraged to do so.

7-Following the interviews, each student is expected to organize the information collected into a 5-10 page critical analysis paper. While the interviews themselves cannot be graded, the interview paper is evaluated using a criterion sheet as attached.

8-On the due date for the papers, each person is expected to give a brief oral report to the class identifying unique/unusual communication demands, problems and behaviors as discovered.

9-The five basic required questions are derived from the first four-to-five weeks of the course. In our (NVCC) SPD 110, this initial segment consists of the elements of human communication with the areas of process, language, listening and non-verbal communication examined.[5] Thus, the five required questions are explored in class prior to the actual interviews. A listing of the questions is as follows:

1-Because research has shown that 70-80% of the work place time is spent in some form of communicating, I would like to ask you about your work time use of it.

A-How much of your work day/night would you say you spent in writing (include word processing)?

B-In reading on average?

C-In speaking on average?

D-In listening on average?

2-What do you consider to be your best communication skill? How did you acquire this skill?

3-In your occupation, what type of speaking and listening problems do you encounter? How do you manage them?

4-Do you have any suggestions to a student of speech communication on how we might improve our listening skill? Speaking skill?

5-My intended career is to be a _____.

What communication skill would you say I will be using the most? Writing? Reading? Speaking? Listening? Please explain.

At this point, the student interviewer can proceed into the career focus question they have selected. These are preplanned by the student and may represent any number of question such as what kinds of skills are required to be a _____? Or what kinds of specialized training do you need? Students are encouraged to keep the career focus question to no more than 5-10 in number.

Although the critical analysis paper may be evaluated from many perspectives, the content on communication skills in the work place takes high priority. Part one of the paper requires a reporting of the facts as discovered using the standard five communication questions as a guide along with the career questions. The format for section one can be a summary by interviewee or by each question.

Part two of the paper asks for a critical reaction to six specifics so that the following are covered: 1) The Communication Climate; 1) The setting of the interviews; 3) The types of questions and the effectiveness of them; 4) Non-verbal behaviors of the interviewees; 5) An analysis of the basic stages of the event and finally; 6) the students' reactions and assessments to the interviews as a class project.

All papers are typed/word processed with a cover sheet required giving such basics as interviewee's names, occupations, position, place of employment, dates and places (if different from

person's employment).

The strategy has been used now for five years and continues to be refined with each semester.

As an example of the type of findings I would like to close my presentation by sharing with you a part of the critical aspect of a nursing student's paper:

Summary of Interviews

All these interviews were taped, with permission, because of the time element. Most of the people had to be interviewed on the job and did not have time to sit down for interviews.

It was interesting to note that most people interviewed had little concept of how much time they spend doing what in a given day. Most of them, based on what I observed, tended to over-estimate the amount of time spent on a given thing. The Security Guard spent more time listening than he realized. He was a good listener and many people talked to him. The Unit Secretary did not spend as much time writing as she thought. She spent more time answering questions and running errands. The Cafeteria worker was a better listener than she realized. She had just learned how to convey and take in a lot of information quickly, a skill she did not know she had. The doctor and the nurse both had a better idea of time spent doing each thing but the doctor did not listen well. I had to ask him some questions twice and explain what I wanted. Some of this was the language problem but most of it was lack of

concentration. The nurse had been doing her work for twenty-five years and had acquired a good deal of skill in listening. She was concise in her answers and not easily distracted. But she overestimated the amount of time she spent listening.

Most of these people did not really understand the difference between hearing and listening. As I asked the questions, I defined the differences, but most had to be reminded several times of the differences.

Because I see most of these people every day, I was able to observe them in their jobs and had an idea of what they did with their time, to some extent.

Less time was spent writing, overall, by the people interviewed, followed by reading. Speaking and listening were about even. Talking and listening were the skills most considered well done, and most stated they acquired the skill by experience.

Most of the people interviewed stated that not paying attention to what was said was the biggest problem in listening. Lack of concentration and being distracted was mentioned as interfering with listening effectively. Most stated they stated things more than once and asked questions to be sure they were understood.

It was almost totally agreed that listening was work and that was very interesting. Learning what made good listeners and then practicing this was mentioned several times.

This was a very interesting project. I certainly learned more about analyzing what I listend to, based on the tone of voice, body

movements and word emphasis.

(Copy is used with permission and courtesy of Lorine W. Jacobson)

Footnotes

1. University of the 21st Century, Commission as appointed by the Governor, Issue five "Blueprints for Organization," Commonwealth of Virginia, Richmond, VA July, 1989.

2. Debbie Goldberg, "Education at Work," Education Review, The Washington Post, August 6, 1989, pp. 12-13.

3. Ibid.

4. Ritch L. Sorenson and Terry A. Pickett, "A Test of Two Teaching Strategies Designed to Improve Interview Effectiveness," Communication Education, Vol. 35, No. 1, January, 1986, p. 21.

5. Joseph A. DeVito, Essentials of Human Communication, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1993, pp. 181-201.

6. Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman, Understanding Human Communication, Fort Worth: Halt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1991, pp. 279-291.